Obsessions between Orient and Occident. On the construction and imagination of «exotic» worlds in silent film

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On the Construction and Imagination of "Exotic" Worlds in Silent Film

Evelyn Echle

The idea of the Orient as the colorful counterpart to the West has a long history in the European imagination. Europeans were familiar with forms of artistic expression from the Islamic world from medieval times on, and works on silk, glass, and metal, followed by brightly colored carpets, became valuable possessions for European elites. This interest intensified and increased into an outright obsession with the Orient as colonial conquests reached their peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Europeans were fascinated not only by their economic interests but also by the culture of "the exotic," including aspects of the adventurous, the fantastic, and, not least, the erotic. Thus, a vivid stereotype developed that long influenced the idea of an entire region with echoes down to this day. Different movements in fashion, literature, and painting dedicated themselves to "exoticism," within which the heavily idealized image of the Orient took form as a phantasm. In the nineteenth century, photographers, alongside travel writers and painters, used their works to give new life to the interplay between reality and cliché. The medium of photography caused radical changes to the experience of, and the longing for, the Orient. One example is the veritable craze for the Orient in Paris and beyond triggered by the French writer, journalist, and photographer Maxime Du Camp's 1852 photography album *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie*. This trend in photography was also of considerable significance for the young medium of film, since Oriental visual worlds produced from a Western perspective always reflected (Western) contemporary visual culture as well. The filming of "exotic" stories granted the cinema an early opportunity to explore connections to this educated middle-class discourse. Feature films did not focus on ethnographic authenticity but instead zeroed in on the emblematic function and generally accepted beauty of a treasure trove of forms that sought to evoke the purportedly magical and sensual aspects of the Orient through patterns and colors. The interest in the exotic—above all, imaginative flights in the fairy-tale style of the *One Thousand and One Nights*—was so prominently present in the silent film era as to justify speaking of a "wave."

In film historiography, the boom in films with Oriental subject matter, such as MARC ANTONIO E CLEOPATRA (ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA, Enrico Guazzoni, ITA 1913), L'AGONIE DE BYZANCE (THE AGONY OF BYZANCE, Louis Feuillade, FRA 1913), DIE AUGEN DER MUMIE MA (THE EYES OF THE MUMMY, Ernst Lubitsch, GER 1918), SUMURUN (Ernst Lubitsch, GER 1920), and THE SHEIKH (George Melford, USA 1921), is often characterized as an escapist strategy and, moreover, one confined to cinema. Until now, too little attention has been paid to the much older cultural discourse and the widespread intermedial reception of the Orient as an aesthetic phenomenon, which exerted a strong influence on the cinema from its creation in 1895 onward. The interest of narrative cinema in exotic stories, whether drawn from classical antiquity, the Bible, or Oriental material in general, can be explained in part by institutional developments in the new medium. The resulting films, which started out as shorts, soon grew through technical developments into longer works with more complex storylines. The years around 1913 saw the production of many of the first monumental films, which can be read as demonstrations of technological progress and as a marketing strategy as well. The cinema of the 1910s sought to dispense with its reputation as a mere amusement for the "uneducated" classes. After the first phase of the cinema, when it was typically a traveling fairground attraction, commercially oriented art productions used fixed places of projection—which would evolve into true cinema palaces—to pursue a new clientele with a larger budget. In short, filmmakers and production companies found it worthwhile to convince the middle classes of the artistic merit of the cinema, and for this reason they chose the economic strategy of enhancing the medium's prestige by drawing on established arts such as painting and the theater. This approach should not be understood as mere imitation but instead as a source of inspiration for innovations specific to film. Oriental subject matter was highly suitable for this objective in multiple respects.

The Colorful Orient as Visual Politics

The Orient was regarded as the empire of images, and as an empire constructed out of images: that is to say, as a kind of imaginary geography that corresponds only conditionally to any localizable place. Much of what was perceived as "Oriental" within the discourse of exoticism in the West was generated out of fantastical visual worlds. The literary scholar Edward Said analyzed this phenomenon in his foundational 1978 work *Orientalism*.[1] In his text, he defined the Orient as a Western construct, an object of appropriation and exploitation. Setting to one side the passionate discussions of cultural criticism unleashed by *Orientalism*, his analysis makes one thing clear: the Orient was (and is) conceived as a counterpart to the Occident. Through this imaginary opposition, a visual space is opened up that seems at once strange and familiar. In the late nineteenth century, nearly all Western travelers with stereotypical ideas set out for the Orient, heading, in particular, for the Middle East and North Africa and choosing as destinations precisely those places that corresponded to their prefabricated ideas. Bazaars and harems, deserts and oases, ephebes and odalisques: everything was to be reproduced later in the travelers' artistic treatments and enriched graphically with details and colors. The Orient was always a topos of visual politics as well. An impressive example is the collection of texts and images in the *Description de l'Égypte*, the prestige project that came about as a result of Napoleon's Egyptian expedition (1798–1801) and which was intended to paper over the military defeat of France in the expedition.[2] The desire to publish at least parts of the material on natural history and archaeology in color—for example, the drawing of a reconstruction of the hypostyle hall in the Temple of Isis on the island of Philae—posed new challenges for the technology of copperplate color printing. Behind this striving, with the Orient a rewarding setting, lay the competition between leading industrial nations for the patents and inventions of industrial mechanization.

Egypt provided a focus for the Western reception of the Orient and the inspiration for numerous silent films. Alongside mummy material—for example, THE EGYPTIAN MUMMY (Lee Beggs, USA 1914) and MERCY, THE MUMMY MUMBLED (R. W. Phillips, USA 1918)—stories from classical antiquity, such as the fate of Cleopatra, provided powerful visual iconography suitable for the early productions of monumental cinema.

There can be no contesting the important function that was played by color. Intermedial references for film were provided by both photography and the Orientalist paintings that had been in vogue in France, Germany, and England in the second half of the nineteenth century. Painters of Orientalism who had enjoyed a broad international reception, such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Frederick Arthur Bridgman, left a lasting mark on our concept of the Orient through the colors and symbols they used. Beyond the voyeuristic gaze directed at women, usually lightly dressed and often reclining, the eye is drawn to

the depiction of an immense diversity of different fabrics. This subject matter is an intermedial presence in the discourse of exoticism. Reclining women in an overloaded décor as the iconography of an imagined Orient appear in many feature films, often staged as veritable tableaux. The Orient thus becomes a site of voluptuousness opposed to the logic of Western industrialization. The exhibition *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* (Masterpieces of Mohammedan Art), mounted in Munich in 1910, asserted the indigenous cultures' own value as a counter to the dominant stereotype established in the painting of the era. Art historians are in agreement that this exhibition inspired new directions in the reception of Islamic art in the West and was a turning point in the Romantic transfiguration and appropriation of Islamic culture.

→ Figs. 1+2

In recent years, photography exhibitions have paid increasing attention to the fin-de-siècle longing for the Orient, a genre of its own within the medium of photography. These exhibitions have drawn on collections such as that of the German diplomat and archaeologist Max von Oppenheim (1860–1946), a man truly obsessed with the Orient. His impressive collection of roughly thirteen thousand photographs is being digitized by the University of Cologne. Another major source of Orientalist photographs from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the private collection of Thomas Walther. That parts of the collection have been acquired by Arab ruling families at auction is a fresh reminder that Orientalist photography is political and invariably associated with questions of history and identity.

As for visualizations of the colorful Orient, the photographers Rudolf Franz Lehnert (1878–1948) and Ernst Heinrich Landrock (1878–1966) require mention. They opened a shop in Tunis in 1904 and sold their color postcards and photographs in large numbers. The subject matter is classic, with coloration following the established coding of the time: every fez a luminous red, backgrounds often lapis lazuli blue, colorful fabrics in a wide variety of patterns draped around the persons depicted. What seems to unite the production of all orientalia is a certain form of encoded beauty that the images were to capture. Photography of this kind often has an uncertain epistemic status in terms of whether it presents a "documentary" depiction or is simply staged. Narrative film is quite different in this regard.

Pictorial Beauty on the Screen

Although silent film drew on the visual arsenal created by photography, the Orientalist iconography of photography was for silent film above all a bountiful fount of source material to supply a conscious desire—as can be observed in film historiography—for "pictorial" beauty on screen. In the first years of the cinema, audiences and producers could be excited by mechanical tricks and gimmicks; by the second decade of cinematography, something new was needed. Oriental episodes in silent films often seem like self-contained spectacles. The filmic sets and props never obey a strict artistic logic; instead they are often, through their inflationary use, more than a little satirical. The way space is "bedecked" with Oriental patterns, columns, carpets, and fantasy garments demands the viewer's complete attention and at the same time generates a coherence in the world narrated within the film. This opulent décor would seem to be the continuation of a tradition of painting, while obtaining a wholly new aesthetic dimension through the materiality of film, film colors, and through the ephemeral nature of projection. Even so, the Orient remains placeless in silent film. Through the colored magic of moving pictures, the silent film endows the Orient with an imaginary empire all its own.

1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

2. See Ulrike Fauerbach, "Die Ägyptischen Tempel, ihre Farben, Lepère und sein Schwiegersohn: Zur Rolle eines Autors der Description de L'Égypte im Polychromiestreit," in *Langfristperspektiven archäologischer Stätten*, ed. Uta Hassler, Munich: Hirmer, 2017, 298–332

Fig. 1 MARCANTONIO E CLEOPATRA (Enrico Guazzoni, ITA 1913). Tinted nitrate film, 35 mm. Credit: National Library of Norway. Photo: Noemi Daugaard

Fig. 2 CLEOPATRA (Roy William Neill, USA 1928). Technicolor No. III, dye-transfer print, nitrate film, 35 mm. Credit: George Eastman Museum. Photo: Barbara Flueckiger


PATHE CINEMA FRANCE

Alexandra Navratil, *All That Slides, Strikes, Rises and Falls*, 2015. Series of 3 woven cotton fabrics with woolen elements, 150 × 750 cm each. Credit: Alexandra Navratil / Dan Gunn Gallery, London (with support from the Mondriaan Fund). Exhibition views, Bolte Lang, Zurich. Photo: Alexander Hana

Tales of Cloud Fabrics and Breathing Forms

Artistic Research into Early Film Colors and Alternative Film Histories in the Work of Alexandra Navratil

Eva Hielscher

The early film colors produced by tinting, toning, hand coloring, and stencil coloring are anything but compromises in need of improvement or primitive precursors of perfected—qua "natural" (or mimetic)—film color processes. On the contrary, as has also been emphasized in film historical research in recent decades, the autonomous colors of silent cinema that were applied to the black-and-white film images retrospectively, have their very own aesthetics, functional principles, and material qualities.[1]

Alexandra Navratil's work is also a form of research, an artistic exploration of precisely these aspects of early film colors, examining the material basis, aesthetics, and techniques used in producing them, and giving them—in particular, tinting and stencil coloring[2]—an alternative existence: an extended life of their own that lends a completely new meaning to the notion of autonomous film colors. It also reflects on the contextual settings and the ways the film (color) industry intertwined with other areas of production in the modern industrial age. Thus, in *All That Slides, Strikes, Rises and Falls* (2015), the Swiss artist—an Amsterdamer by choice for many years—underscores the relationship between the motion picture and textile industries and makes this visible on the (color) material level.[3] The woven lengths of fabric, created in collaboration with the TextielMuseum in Tilburg, Netherlands, show greatly enlarged tinted film strips with images of cloud configurations—motifs Navratil has borrowed from silent nonfiction films from the collection of the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. Various parallels spring to mind associating the weaving together of a textile fabric and the knitting together of a cinematic *fabric* from individual shots by means of montage.[4] But Navratil probes far deeper into the material. The cotton that is the basis of her weaving work points to one of the main components of celluloid film.[5] Cotton—or cotton cellulose, to be more precise—served not only as a natural product for the textile industry but also as a raw material for the plasticized cellulose nitrate base that was, up until the 1950s, the support on which the photographic emulsion of a film was coated.[6] In addition to this similarity, however, it is above all the color in Navratil's large-format textile film